Survey Development Guidelines

Sections that are highlighted and italicized support equity-driven decisions.

Defining Survey Purpose

Surveys are administered to systematically gather information about behaviors, needs, and opinions. Surveys can gauge attitudes and opinions about programs, modify current practices, and add credibility to initiatives.

Before survey development begins, a "survey development team" of interested people should be convened to discuss the purpose(s) of the survey and the intended use of the results. The evaluator creates the survey, but the content of the survey should be determined in partnership with those who have asked for the data a survey will collect. Be mindful of the survey's purpose throughout item writing, when connecting with respondents, and when summarizing survey results.

There are several questions important to defining the purpose of a survey.

1. **Is a survey the best way to gather the answer to your question(s)?** Surveys are useful but only one of many ways to collect information. Consider the question you want to be answered and determine if a survey will produce the necessary information. Some information will be better gathered using informal conversations, established databases, interviews, or observations.

2. **Who will respond to your survey?** It is important to consider who is the best source of information for the question(s) you want to answer. For example, if you want to know why students do not complete homework assignments, teachers may be able to provide one perspective, but the students will be able to provide a more complete picture that is authentic from their perspective.

3. **How many people will you survey? How will they be selected?** Do you want to survey the whole population (e.g., all Family Literacy parents in Nebraska) or a sample of that population (e.g., 80 Family Literacy parents randomly chosen)? The size of the population determines this. If the population is very large, it will be difficult to survey every member. In this case, create a representative sample that mirrors the population. *If your population is relatively small, you might want to survey everyone to make accurate statements about that group's perceptions.* Whether you identify a representative sample or include the whole population may depend on whether you have access to all the members of the group (e.g., Nebraska parents of elementary-age students) and a way to contact specific members.

Information of interest and the intended use

When creating a survey, it is important to be transparent about how the information will be used. Many respondents will be reluctant to reply to a survey if the information's intended use is unclear. Let respondents know if the survey results will be used, for example, to adjust a program or give information to support an idea. Also, let respondents know if they will receive a summary of the results.

Understanding Survey Format and Design

Method of Administration

The two most common methods of administration are self-completed and interviewer-completed.

1. **Self-completed**. For this mode of administration, the survey is distributed through the mail, through an electronic means (email or web-based), or in person, and the respondent answers the survey questions on their own. Self-completed surveys are often preferred when collecting sensitive information. *Factors that could impact the results of self-completed surveys include*
    a. Bias due to a participant's level of education and the complexity of the language of the survey
    b. Bias due to access to and familiarity with technology (for electronic administration)
    c. Frustration or fatigue resulting in unanswered questions or an uncompleted survey

2. **Interviewer Completed.** For this mode of administration, the survey is delivered either face-to-face or using technology such as a telephone or software supporting a similar connection. The person conducting the survey may be focused on collecting information one-on-one or through a group such as a focus group. *Factors impacting the results of these surveys include*
    a. Bias toward socially desirable answers
    b. Bias toward stable populations with income that supports access to the required technology
    c. Difficulty in addressing sensitive issues
    d. Feelings of non-anonymity
    e. More likely to have a higher response rate

Method of Delivery

The two most common methods for delivering a survey are paper-pencil and electronic. The advantages of electronic surveys might include lower cost, decreased response time, greater administration control, and immediate access to data. *Disadvantages of electronic administration include the risk of multiple responses from the same person and a lack of*

representativeness of the population. In addition, electronic surveys tend to have a lower response rate than paper surveys.

The choice among these methods is also driven by factors such as the purpose of the survey and intended use of the results, characteristics of the survey participants, the format of the questions, and the respondent's access to technology.

1. **Purpose and intended use.** If a survey requires anonymity, self-completed paper and web-based surveys (without tracking) align with this requirement. If strict anonymity is not required and distribution of respondents on specific identifiers is necessary, the use of email-based surveys for which respondent characteristics are associated with an email address and/or inclusion of survey questions supports the ability to report this information.

2. ***Characteristics of participants.*** Before the development of items, consideration should be given to how the population's characteristics, such as age, income, English language proficiency, education level, and geographic location, will likely impact how respondents interact with and respond to survey questions. Insights gained about the target population can influence the type of questions used in the survey, the complexity of the survey in terms of language and branching, and the method used to administer the survey.

3. ***Access to technology*.** The access to technology encompasses both hardware and software and impacts survey development and survey administration as well as the analysis of results.

Question structure

There are a variety of question types that can be used in surveying. The information sought, and the intended use of the results influences the type(s) of items developed. Identifying the type of question(s) used for the survey is also influenced by participant characteristics and the use of technology. For example, if complex branching among questions on the survey is necessary, an online survey is more effective and efficient so long as the target population is likely to have both access to (the Internet) and the ability (computer, tablet, smartphone) to use this type of tool.

While there are a variety of item types used on surveys, most surveys contain a combination of more traditional closed- and open-ended question formats. Closed-ended items are typically selected-response items in which respondents select a response from a scale or a list that best represents the respondent's knowledge, belief, attitude, perception, interest, or satisfaction. Response options may be posed in multiple ways, including but not limited to discrete responses, categories of responses, and the use of a variety of rating scales.

General tips for constructing or selecting questions

1. Use conventional language that will make sense to the respondent
2. Be clear and concise
3. Keep length and complexity (e.g., reading level) appropriate for the respondent audience
4. Use appropriate response formats that align with the intent of the question
5. Take care when constructing scales
    a. Balance response across scales (i.e., use an equal number of negative and positive response options)
    b. Use neutral categories with caution and consider instead the use of a selection such as "Not Applicable," "I Don't Know," or "I Have No Opinion."
    c. Carefully consider the placement of positive and negative ends of the scales and the potential for unintended pattern responses or the introduction of bias into survey results. For example,
        i. Avoid using scale points that include absolutes such as Always and Never.
        ii. Ensure that the positive end of the scale varies across items to represent different respondent points of view about what is a positive response.
6. Map out response patterns that include branching, skipping questions based on conditions of previous responses, etc.; consider the impact on the overall experience of the respondent
7. *Avoid*
    a. Biasing words
    b. Double-edged questions that can be interpreted in different ways
    c. Negative phrasing
    d. Leading language

Survey Tryouts

Surveys should be field-tested before official dissemination. *Once the survey is developed into its final version, invite a small sample from the target population to take it and provide feedback to you.*

At this point, it would be advisable to invite field test *participants who are underrepresented members of your target population, especially those who have yet to contribute to developing the survey items.* The feedback received could help you ensure that offensiveness is avoided and may increase equitable accessibility.

Questions to ask during this step could include

- Are the directions and questions easy to understand?
- Are there any missing response choices based on your personal experiences with the topics in the survey?

- Are there any gaps in the questions on the survey that should be addressed?
- Is there anything in the survey that concerned you or was offensive?
- Did the mechanics of the (electronic) survey work as expected?
- How long did it take you to complete the survey?
- Is there any other feedback that you would like to provide?

It is important to seriously consider all feedback you receive, regardless of how difficult it may be to hear. *If you have received or need help managing unexpected feedback, involve your survey development team. Together you can discuss how best to move forward.*

Providing Survey Results

Survey data should be shared with a written explanation of the survey development (including who was involved), a copy of the survey, administration procedures (including timeframes), sample or population description (including % of respondents), analysis methods, and a professional summary of findings, which may include data tables or graphs.

Understanding the Audience for Results

The summary of findings should be written in language appropriate for the audience. An executive summary appropriate for a broader range of readers should be made available if the audience desires it.

Providing Data for Interpretation and Use

The summary of findings should include any caveats for data interpretation and generalizability limitations based on the sample or population surveyed, % of respondents, errors in data collection, analysis limitations (if appropriate), and the purpose of the survey. Results of scale (e.g., Likert-type) items should be reported as frequency distributions. Item means can also be included but should be one of many summaries of scale items. Information on appropriate interpretations and generalizations that could be made from the findings should be included.